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Individual Solutions:

An Interview with Hector Babenco

Argentine emigré Hector Babenco has established himself after only three films as one of the most important post-“Cinema Novo” directors in Brazil. His films are chronicles of intolerable brutality in the lives of outlaws and outcasts spawned by the unforgiving squalor which is the lot of Brazil’s poor. Babenco portrays the struggle for survival in its harshest terms, while evoking moments of exquisite tenderness, selfless love, honor, loyalty, and moral strength. Most astounding is his powerful sense of the absurd. He is able to draw attention to the ridiculous and the mad in the most tragic of circumstances. In PIXOTE, who can keep from laughing when a handsome well-dressed Brazilian john lustfully embraces a theatrically passionate prostitute only to be confronted by three brats pressing pistols into his face?

Babenco’s second film, LÚCIO FLÁVIO (1977) became Brazil’s fourth largest box-office hit, partially because it told the story of an underground criminal described as South America’s Clyde Barrow, but also because Babenco dared to examine Lúcio Flávio’s connections with Brazil’s notorious police death squads.

PIXOTE (1980), Babenco’s third film, has achieved international success. The film has mythic qualities embedded in the documentary-like realism which has come to characterize many of the best Brazilian films of the last few years, including Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s THE AMULET OF OGÚM and Jorge Bodánsky’s IRACEMA.

PIXOTE received the New York Film Critics Award and the Los Angeles Film Critics Award for Best Foreign Film of the Year (1981). The film was nominated for a Golden Globe as the Best Foreign Film, and Marília Pera was voted Best Actress of the Year by the National Society of Film Critics. The following interview was conducted in Los Angeles on two separate occasions during February and March of 1982 while Hector Babenco and Marília Pera were in the United States to accept their awards

and to arrange for distribution of his first two films.

Since much of what follows concerns ideas and techniques which went into the making of PIXOTE, a brief synopsis is in order:

During a routine police sweep of São Paulo streets, Pixote (Fernando Ramos da Silva), an abandoned ten-year-old boy, Lilica (Jorge Julião), an effeminate adolescent, and other boys are taken to a juvenile detention center where they begin to learn the basics of survival in the face of police brutality, rape, and murder. When the web of intimidation and murder perpetrated by the police threatens to engulf them, several of the boys escape. Pixote, Lilica, and Diego (José Nilson dos Santos) find themselves on the street in a group led by Dito (Gilberto Moura), an older macho teenager who becomes Lilica’s lover. They pursue a life of petty crime until Lilica makes a sexual conquest of Cristal (Tony Tornado), a drug dealer who commissions the gang to make a cocaine delivery in Rio. In Rio they are ripped off by adult criminals, but inadvertently get their revenge when Pixote stabs the stripper who stole their drugs. Her purse yields a gun and enough money for Pixote, Dito, and Lilica to buy the rights to an aging alcoholic whore named Sueli (Marília Pera), who becomes a mother and lover to the boys. Using her as a decoy they casually mug her customers at gunpoint. The crime wave leads to the group’s most harmonious moments, until Lilica gracefully departs, his feminine role usurped by Sueli. One night during a botched mugging Pixote kills both Dito and Sueli’s American john. For a moment Sueli contemplates escaping to the country with Pixote, but then rejects him. Pixote goes out on the streets to start a new life, with the gun in his belt.

How did the idea for Pixote develop?

My first intention was to make a documentary about abandoned children with children



PIXOTE

in a real reformatory, because they don't do anything all day. They hang around the playgrounds, walk in the corridors; they have nothing to do. I thought that perhaps I can pick up all these children, do improvisations with them in a workshop, and let each one tell me his history for a long 16mm documentary. My vision of the film was a group work involving 200 children, but after ten or twelve visits to the reform school the authorities closed the door on me, stopping me from working in real reformatories. At this point, I very excitedly decided to write a script and do a fiction film—to try to make another reality *like* the reality they wouldn't permit me to show.

How much of the story in the script you wrote for Pixote with Jorge Duran was based on the novel Infância Dos Mortos by José Louzeiro?

I only bought the rights to the novel because we were making a film about children in the streets of São Paulo and I was afraid of possible conflicts. In the film there is nothing of the novel.

What was the script really based on, if not the novel?

I had done two hundred hours of interviews with real abandoned children in the reforma-

tories. And also, children from the reformatories came to my office to tell me about their lives—in and out of the reformatories. I built my script with the help of situations told to me by these children.

Once the script was written I began working with the child-actors without using the script. The children never read the screenplay. Each day we had a workshop with the idea of developing a new sequence in the script, but each day was as if it were a new film. I told them the situation. We discussed what can happen in the given situation where you are sitting, why? What the reactions can be? And then we did an improvisation based on the situation. After that I looked in my script to correct some dialogue, and in the afternoon we began to shoot. I didn't want the children to memorize the dialogue or to know the whole story. Also, I made the film in dramatic sequence, in the same order as you see it. I made the film in a "real time" schedule for the children's understanding of how the story goes on, to help them understand that what happens today is a consequence of what happened yesterday.

The producers went crazy because the film ended up costing twice as much, but it was

wonderful for the film.

How long did it actually take you to shoot the film this way?

Sixteen weeks.

It has been pointed out that none of the children were professional actors. Where did you find them, and how did you go about selecting them?

The children are from the poor neighborhoods of São Paulo, because in Brazil child actors are very bad. They work in soap operas in television and they are very stereotyped children. I would never have gotten the same results from actors as from the children from the poor districts of São Paulo. It would be impossible. There are a lot of scenes in the film where I wrote the first idea, but the children developed it through improvisation and other things. For example, when the prostitute Sueli and the three children are eating in the bar, I wrote the last line of the scene as Pixote saying, "Okay dinner was good, now I want an ice cream cone to finish dinner." And at that moment he turned to the prostitute and asked her, "And what do you want?" "I want a cognac," she said, but at the same time she understands she is with children and says, "I want a cognac with marshmallows." It's ridiculous for everyone. Then Pixote kisses her on the lips. I didn't write that. This came about as a result of their improvisational work.

Also, the ending: when Pixote leaves the room, putting on his jacket, he takes the gun. It's improvisation because the gun is his gun, a part of his character. He can't go out into the street without the gun. The child improved the character very much. He worked hard for a long time.

But how did you actually find and select the children to play each character?

The producer went to the neighborhoods and prepared the population, talking to them until we arrived. Then we did some collective exercises. We worked for almost a month in all these neighborhoods to find these kinds of children. At the beginning there were 800 children every day.

Then we went into a small theater downtown, and the production paid for the selected children to come to the theater to begin workshops. At the beginning there were eight or nine in each group. We had three or four groups for four months working three to four

and a half days each week. Then we exchanged the groups, and each month we had an improvisation with all the groups for me to take out some of them so there would be fewer people. This went on until I decided who would be Pixote, who would be Lilica, Dito, and the others. The seven children who did the film were prepared for four months.

These children didn't know about anything; not about evil, about responsibility, about memory. They are very tough and tense. I needed to relax them and show them understanding. It was very difficult to work with them. I don't know if I ever experienced anything as hard in my life. We were crazy to do that, but I think I would not have found the same result another way.

Why did you choose Fernando Ramos da Silva to play Pixote? Was it what one critic called his "preternaturally aged face," or the impassive look on his face—as if he were not really present, but constantly observing and analyzing everything around him?

At first I had four or five choices for the character Pixote. One night after midnight every second phone call I got was collect from a name that I didn't know. Finally I accepted, and he said, "You don't remember me. My name is Fernando. Last Monday the producer gave me bus money to come to the workshop, but my brother stole my money and I've been missing three times." And he cried on my phone because "I want to be an actor." I said, "Okay, take a taxi tomorrow and the company will pay the taxi and we'll resolve the problem."

The next day he arrived very dirty, without shoes, without anything. He didn't know how to read or write. He never went to school. He was like the character Pixote. He didn't believe in anything. His life was a daily fight with reality.

But when we began to give the children the chance to express themselves, to imagine situations and to represent them, it became easier to work with them. After two or three weeks the child really half-trusted me.

Were you able to maintain his trust throughout the film?

The first day of shooting I repeated the same shot with Pixote six times. At the end of each shot I told him "Okay, fantastic, but I want to do it again." And after that I said "Okay, fantastic, but I want to do it again." He was be-

coming very angry with me. At the end of the day my assistant came and told me, "Hector, Fernando doesn't want to come to work tomorrow, and he wants to abandon the film." I asked her why? And she answered, "Because he told me that you are a liar." I said, "I am a liar? I never told him a lie." I knew very well that my relations with him were very honest. And I called Fernando.

We walked around the block to begin the conversation, and I asked him, "My assistant tells me that you won't come to work tomorrow, and you told her that I am a liar. Can you explain that?" He said, "Hector, you really are a liar, because after each shot you told me that it was fantastic, it was wonderful, but you want to repeat it. If the shot is good and fantastic, why do you want to make another one? Why don't you tell me that you don't like it and that's why you want to repeat the shot?"

They don't know anything about movies. I stopped the film, and the next day I put all the children in my car and took them to the moviola. I taught them how we edit film, how we choose the material for a film. Fernando saw the six or seven takes of the same shot, and I asked him, "Which is the best for you? Can you see the difference? In this one your face is very sad. In this other one your face is not in a good position." And he began to understand how we made the film. It was school for all of us; for me and for them.

Did you spend any time studying the well-known directors who got great performances out of non-actors, like Abel Gance, Bresson, Visconti, or De Sica?

I never studied cinema, or read any books about movies, about technical language. For me it's either emotion or mind. I never studied the films that I saw in my life. I never became preoccupied with trying to understand how the director did this or that scene, how he picked this kind of language or that one.

How then did you develop your technique for working with the children in Pixote?

I worked in the theater when I was an adolescent, and I remembered all of the exercises, improvisation, and all the workshops we did. Also, I like to work with people. For me, beginning to understand sensitive relationships and beginning to build characters is like playing, it's like a game.

In *Pixote* I also had an assistant who helped



Fernando Ramos da Silva: Pixote

prepare the children. For many years she had worked in therapy groups for people in jail. Twice a week she worked with adult men in prison, and twice a week in a women's prison . . . not psychology and not sociology. She was an actress, and very talented at doing that. She helped me very much with the children. Other than that, it was my feelings.

What happened when you brought a professional actress like Marília Pera in to work with the children?

Marília Pera began acting in theater when she was six years old. She was an exception. I had invited many actresses to play the character Sueli, but the very important actresses in Brazil didn't accept because the character's time in the film is only 15 or 20 minutes. At the time Marília was busy with theater, but one day I invited her to watch a workshop done by the children. A half hour later she called me back to say she wanted to work with me and the children—without reading the script. She understood very quickly the kind of relationship needed to work with the children to achieve a great performance. She became another child, without other levels, without differences. She came to the workshops the same time each day as the children because she wanted to begin work with them, even though I did not ask her to come until hours later.

What happened to Fernando and the other boys after you finished the film? Did they go back onto the streets?

The background Fernando came from was the same as that of the character he played in the film. But for him it was different. After the film opened in Rio, a journalist asked Fernando if he wasn't afraid to live through the

same situations as were shown in the film. He said, "Sorry, but in the film that was Pixote, my name is Fernando." He could not accept the idea that the two are the same; and I'm telling you it is one and the same, because at ten o'clock Fernando is in the street and the police ask him where he's going. And he answers, "I don't know." They say, "Come with us." And the film begins again. The reality of Fernando's life is the same as Pixote's. At the point that he gets picked up in the street he can become the same as Pixote became in the film. But he didn't accept that idea, because for him it's so different . . . being an actor. When I first screened the film for the crew and for the children, I asked Fernando if he liked the film. He said, "There are two or three scenes I would like to repeat because I don't like my performance." He had become an actor, and was so sad.

Fernando now works in soap operas on television, but they don't want to renew his contract because he's very lazy and can't keep up with the fast pace of soap opera shooting. They make one segment a day. He doesn't know how to read and write, and for him it's very difficult to memorize the lines. It's very different from our work with him. He is 12 years old now and is going to school, not the same boy at all as before we did the film.

He lives in the same place. There's no more money in his pocket, he has the same friends, but inside he's not the same person because he knows different people now. From working with us he learned that you don't need to lie, and that it's important to take responsibility. The film has changed his whole life. I think it was very important for all those children, including the boy who played Lilica. He's a fantastic actor. He now works in theater. He is the only one that found an adult job after *Pixote*.

Are you saying that their lives were changed because they were given a chance to play with their imaginations?

On one level I made the film only to prove that it was possible to change a child. When you arm this child, and three, four million other children by helping them to begin thinking, he begins to resemble you and me. When you help these people they grow up very quickly. This is the real problem of the film.

You know it would be impossible to make a

film like Pixote in the United States using real children. I wonder if you've been attacked for exposing your child actors to such blatant sex and violence during the filming?

Of course. Last year my film was screened at the Biarritz Film Festival, and the mayor of the city put up a poster saying: "This film contains very hard and strong scenes. Delicate people should not come to see the film." They are crazy. In Brazil we have no more censorship now.

We need to look at reality, and sometimes our preconceptions are larger than that reality. For example, the feeling about promiscuity that these children have is very different from our idea of promiscuity. When I did the scene in which Pixote and Lilica watch Dito, the black boy, having sex with Sueli the prostitute, I wrote the scene putting Pixote and Lilica in another room while Dito and Marília Pera are making love—and they are watching like voyeurs. After ten minutes, Pixote, I mean Fernando, came in and said, "Hector, why when we're together watching television we are on the same bed, and why when my friend makes love to her we aren't on the bed?"

He corrected me, because my understanding and my vision are very bourgeois and moralistic. Fernando lives in one room with his eight brothers, his mother and his father. For him promiscuity is different than for you or for me. That doesn't make him good or bad. It's only that he's different. For me it's impossible to understand because my education and background are so different. But I learned a lot from the children when I did the film. What is important is how he feels morality, how he understands morality. What is his relationship to feelings? With responsibility? With love? With real affection? That is important. And that has nothing to do with promiscuity.

So you are saying that in order to capture someone else's reality, someone else's moral values, you have to suspend your own evaluation of reality. To me this verges on a documentary approach. Do you have a background in documentaries?

Two or three commercial documentaries, but nothing really. Of course I consider my cinema a very real cinema, but Brazil is a very special country. In Brazil reality is two or three times more exciting and sophisticated than any picture. I take things from reality,

but my films are not journalistic films. My films are not made up of realistic scenes. In *Pixote* you have a realistic background. Of course these children exist, and these kinds of relationships in the reformatory also exist. But the most important thing is not showing how these people live, but showing how these people are *not* able to find a way to live.

Some people tell me my films are very political, they are social denunciations. This isn't true. You can study all the political or socially condemning feature-type films—Costa-Gavras, other directors—and you will see the difference very quickly between my cinema and these others. In these others you can find a very precise ideology. In my films there isn't anything like that. I don't believe in political messages or flags. You won't find a flag in my films. The most important thing in my films are the interrelations between these people, these children. In *Pixote* I wanted to discover when a child becomes an adult. He may be nine, ten, or fourteen years old, but he's an adult.

Of course in order to make this inquiry, to carry out this research, I can't forget the background where these children live, because it's very strong, very real. For *Pixote* I used one kind of portrait, one kind of framing. Each frame looks like a painting. There aren't long traveling shots. I did not want the camera between me and reality. I wanted to put it aside. I wanted the camera only for registering this reality. I wanted to use it minimally, only as much as was necessary to capture this reality.

When people talk it's very hard. But the dialogue never escapes reality. Sometimes it doesn't express reality—it intends to tell something else. I don't accept films where they put poetry in the characters' mouths. Because sometimes when you work with a very horrible reality like poverty in the slums, it's okay the way it is. I photograph it the way it is. If I put my intelligence and my sense of poetry in my characters, I would lose the parameters of what I want to say.

How exactly do you protect the language of your characters from your . . .

. . . Influence? I don't influence them. I don't have influence because I'm outside.

How do you stay outside?

In order to make the film I had to become a child too. I wasn't in a superior position to

the children. Making this film was also an exercise for me. But inside I knew very well where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.

But then what do you actually tell the actors to do?

I didn't tell them anything, because they discovered what they needed to say alone. I never told them to speak one line then another sentence. Never. That was only in the script and for me, so that I wouldn't lose what I was after. I studied my script, but I went to the workshops with the children to do the improvisation. They gave me the right words, the right sentences. I never told them exactly what to say. But at the same time it isn't a documentary because we worked hard with the children. We prepared the scenes in a way that satisfied them and also satisfied me. We did it together. And then I said, "Okay, I need two mechanical performances so I'll know how to shoot it." I introduced *the problem* camera only at the end—before that we only worked in improvisation.

You rehearsed it and let them form the language. You say that this isn't documentary, but there are more and more documentaries being made using the same, or similar techniques.

No, because they performed exactly what I had in the script. The things they did in the workshop were the same as what I had done two months earlier when I wrote the script. Only the ending with *Pixote* walking on the tracks wasn't in my script.

In my script, after *Pixote* leaves Sueli's room the camera moves outside to show 25 people standing at a bus stop. There were workers, students, many different kinds of people. *Pixote* enters the frame and stands by the wall like the others waiting for the bus. And he begins playing with the wall, scrawling on it. At the same time the camera starts a small zoom away from the bus. When the bus leaves all the people have gotten on the bus and the frame is empty. The camera zooms in quickly to the wall, and you read on the wall, "The heart is round like an orange." It's the same sentence that he wrote in the middle of the film when he was learning how to write.

In another interpretation this becomes the story of a graffiti. Sometimes you read graffiti and you don't know who wrote it. This is really a story about graffiti—*Pixote's* story. I shot

two versions of the ending, one without Pixote—only the grafitti—and another one with him and the grafitti, with Pixote in the frame too at the end, looking at the camera. It's a kind of "J'Accuse" look at the camera. The shot looks like a freeze frame, but it's not a freeze frame, he's just staring at the camera.

You didn't use either ending, instead you have him walking on the tracks.

The papers were writing about grafitti every day. People suddenly discovered grafitti. Grafitti became too popular, so I changed the ending.

You said earlier that you set out to discover how a child becomes an adult. What did you find out about this process?

I saw when I first visited the reformatory that the added experience of some kinds of situations make you older than before. In the film, when Pixote kills the blond woman, he doesn't kill her—he just sticks a knife in her stomach. He doesn't want to kill anyone. He wants the money. The fight between the woman and the child is the same as children playing in kindergarten. "Give me my pocketbook." "I don't want to give it to you." "Please give it to me." Whap.

We tried to recreate all the children's situations because they are children and they relate to the world at a childhood level. But of course at the end of the film Pixote is not the same boy as at the beginning. He learns survival during a very short time, and becomes a marked man for the rest of his life. Where can you save this boy? Never. You can pay \$1 million to the biggest doctor in the whole world and you won't be able to save this boy. He's lost.

Have you been criticized for having such a skeptical perspective?

Of course. They didn't invite the film to the film festival in Havana. They said the same thing that the moral conservatives tell me. Extreme left-wing people and extreme right-wing people are in exactly the same position on this film. The left-wing people say, "You show the dirt in society, but you don't say who is at fault." Left-wing people want a theorem. They want a formula.

I know the kinds of films being made in all the countries of South America, and I'm sure that my films and not the leftist films are the most socially powerful. I don't believe in the solution proposed by the leftists. I believe only

in individual solutions. And I did *Pixote* in order to show that. The relationships of one man, two, three, four or five men, are more important than the whole society.

The world of definitions is so easy. When you find the right word to define something, you lose the thing because you found the word. I tried to destroy the word and really pick up reality and look at it on all its sides to try to discover how I can not only help this reality, but also how I can perhaps change the reality. In the process I discovered that reality is not as bad as we think it is. The moral conceptions of poor children are so different from our conception of morality. Their sexual morality is different from mine or yours or my daughter's.

You can read about conventions where 500 psychologists go to a big hotel for a week to discuss abandoned children. Each one gives his own explanation, but nobody goes to the child to ask him: What do you want? What do you think about your life? There is no one solution for two or three people. All the solutions are individual solutions. Each person has his own salvation card.

It seems from the film that you believe there is some hope in the small survival groups people create in bad situations, in a sort of artificial family. In many ways the small gang that Pixote and his friends form is the most positive human structure in the film.

The film isn't only about relationships and conditions in a reformatory. It's about discovering how children begin relationships, and how the family is the most important nucleus. When the children escape the reformatory and four or five of them are alone in the street they unconsciously become a family. The group is created for instinctive reasons, not out of a desire on the part of the boys to live together and work together. It's out of need—real need.

And does this inevitably lead to the creation of a group resembling the nuclear or traditional family?

. . . And the need to make a family among women is larger than in men. Women really make the family. If you go to a reform school for women it looks like 20 families living together. One woman is the man, another woman is the wife, other women are the children, sisters, and brothers. Each family is in a group, the same group you find in *Pixote* in the second half of the film after they escape.

Director
Hector
Babenco
shooting
PIXOTE



When they meet the prostitute Sueli, she takes the place of the woman, and the group is broken up. We had this conceptual point of view before we started writing the script. It's because of this that I'm sure the film is not only a social documentary, or a social criticism film. It touches on other levels of knowledge about the relationships of the children.

If these kinds of groups are so much more visible and stronger among women why didn't you make a film about institutionalized women or girls?

I preferred concentrating on men because I'm a man and I know the needs of men very well. Perhaps if I were a woman I would prefer making a film about abandoned girls—because it's another tragedy.

During the last few years there have been a couple of excellent films on the subject of abandoned and incarcerated girls. One is János Rózsa's Sunday Daughters, about girls in a Hungarian reform school, and another is the highly popular Christiane F from Germany, about an abandoned girl in Berlin.

When I began writing my script I read a newspaper story about a reformatory for girls where 14 girls tried to commit suicide together by drinking four bottles of some very strong

cleaning fluid. It was incredible. But this isn't only a Brazilian social problem. You have these kinds of relationships in US reform schools as well. It's not only a South American problem.

It's interesting you should say that, because one of the most powerful scenes in Rózsa's Sunday Daughters is a group suicide scene in which five girls get drunk and cut their wrists on broken bottles in the reform school. But to get back to Pixote: essential to the original group of boys is the transvestite Lilica, who fulfills all the feminine roles until the boys meet Sueli. Pauline Kael likened Lilica to the Giulietta Masina character in Nights of Cabiria; he is so emotionally sensitive, wise, and romantic. Where did this character come from?

I've seen many Lilicas in the schools and in the streets. She takes the place of the woman in the family—in this kind of family. I have empathy with this character and I like him, but he's there mostly because he exists. We need to make films and write about things we know. It is a way of paying tribute or homage to these people who accept life with such dignity in these hard conditions. The characters are my heroes.

Is there any discrimination in Brazil against transvestites, or against homosexuals?

There is a lot of discrimination. He's integrated only in this (Pixote's) group. The Cubans didn't accept the film for the Havana Film Festival. They said that the film has too much immorality, and that homosexuality is a capitalist sickness.

What about Sueli? Where did the character for the prostitute originate?

At the beginning of the film I explain that the film is not about orphans, but about abandoned children. But not only children are abandoned in the world. I am abandoned also—today, yesterday. It's an emotional state. If you are sure about your life you're dead. You don't live. Sueli is another abandoned woman.

I like people who have suffered every day of their lives. The character Sueli is a very poor woman. She doesn't have anything in life. She cries for the stupidest things because anyone can stop her in the doorway at night. It's ridiculous, but that ridiculous situation is the most important thing for her. And because of that she's important.

At the end of the film, why does Sueli suddenly reject Pixote instead of pursuing the more harmonious possibilities suggested when she takes him in her arms and nurses him as if he were her own child?

She doesn't have the structure to accept

him. Can you imagine an ending where Sueli tells Pixote to stay with her? Can you believe that? I'm sure that if I gave the scene to Pixote and Sueli without a script the ending would have been the same as it is in the film and in the script. I shot one version where Pixote goes to the door, looks back at Sueli and says, "I'll see you later." "Later" in the sense of tomorrow or never. I'll see you again some day. It was fantastic. I'm sure that if we did it in improvisation it would come out the same as what I wrote.

Another thing is that reality is twice as strong as what you see in the film. My film is a Cinderella tale in comparison with the reality. Families are being destroyed because people don't make enough money to meet the family's minimum needs. It's a major social problem. At the beginning of the film I explain that the film does not talk about exceptions, or about orphans, but about abandoned children. They are all children who have homes, but sometimes there's only a father, or the father and mother work away from home many hours a day and the children are at home.

It's a political question. I want rich people to begin thinking that the only way to stay rich is by helping the workers. Because if they don't change their mentality, in a few years Brazil and the other countries will become the



PIXOTE:
*The
ending*

new Nicaraguas and the new El Salvadors. There is no other solution than that rich people understand that they need to take less money each year and pay those who work for them more. When you have 120 million people like in Brazil, and five million live very very well and 115 million live very very badly, you break the balance. This is not leftist radical politics, or my invention. It's the historical reality. And the men who have the power are beginning to understand that they can't keep going on this way.

But this isn't only a Brazilian or South American problem. In New York, ten minutes from the Museum of Modern Art you have the same problems. But American industry doesn't finance films that look like *Pixote*. The Bronx is waiting for its *Pixote*, and Harlem awaits a film like *Pixote*. In the moral sense of the word, Brazilian censorship is not as strong as the financial and economic censorship you have in the U.S. We need to rethink which is more democratic. Here you can do anything you want because nobody tells you not to, but people won't give you money to do the film. In Brazil I made this film with money from the government. Obviously they don't like it, but they didn't forbid me to make the film. Embrafil, a kind of Canadian Film Board, gave us the money to make the film.

Your films are more open and more realistic than films made in almost any other country today. Was there any interference at all when you made Pixote?

They didn't give me permission to shoot the film in the reform schools, but they didn't have the power to prevent me from doing the film out of the schools. The reform school in *Pixote* was made out of an old military barracks we rented when we were preparing the script.

At one time censorship was very serious in Brazil.

We haven't had censorship since 1979.* A film can be banned for those under 14 or under 18. There's nothing else.

*In April, 1982, two months after this interview was completed, the Brazilian government cancelled the première of director Roberto Farias's *Onward Brazil*, a film about terrorism, repression, and police torture during the period 1969–1974. Farias has said that his film about an apolitical Brazilian swept up in the violence of the times is really "about the fear everyone felt in those days." The film was banned

Look, the film I made before *Pixote* is about the relationship of the paramilitary police groups with a very famous bandit in Rio named Lúcio Flávio. It's a kind of *Serpico* taking place in Rio. For ten years this bandit worked with partners who were in the police. One day he decided to break with his life and to write the papers and tell everyone about his connections. It's a true story.

We made *Lúcio Flávio* in 1976 and 1977 when political repression in Brazil was at its worst. The newspapers, television and radio news, all the people working in information, were forbidden to talk about the death squads. When the film opened in Brazil it made a real commotion because there were eight million spectators in four months. It was the first time that the audience saw how crime was organized, because a lot of people thought that the death squad was only a paramilitary organization, and no one knew until the film opened that the death squad was made up of ordinary police without uniforms. In Rio alone the death squad killed 1,500 people each year for the last ten years.

Is there still a death squad in Brazil today?

They don't kill more than 150 people a year. The situation is better—80% better.

Weren't you afraid that something would happen while you were making the film?

No, because it was secret. You couldn't talk about it.

Yet you made a film about the death squads?

Yes, but I spoke about the death squads only between the lines. It was the tip of an iceberg. Because of this audiences who don't know how the political police function don't understand the film. For people who don't have the same kind of police there is information missing from the film for a coherent reading of the situation in *Lúcio Flávio*. I showed the film to the president of a big Italian distribution company. Afterwards he asked me, "But where is the death squad in this film?"

because it was judged to pose a "potential provocation against the current regime." The controversy has resulted in the dismissal of the state film industry's president, and may dampen hopes for the political liberalization process described by Babenco here. Future works by Farias and "other enterprising Brazilian directors" are in the balance. (*Veja* of São Paulo, April 14, 1982)

He didn't understand that the people working in the death squad are the same people that work in the police. Neither have uniforms, because in South America, you know . . . People from Peru, Chile, Argentina, even from Mexico understand very quickly. But in the industrialized countries people don't know this reality. Because of this *Lúcio Flávio* has not been seen by audiences in North America or in Europe.

How did the Brazilian government react to the film?

For many months they wanted to ban the film, but we negotiated the addition of a written sentence at the end of the film. When the screen goes black it says, "All the policemen involved in the Lúcio Flávio affair were kicked out of the police and punished." I don't think I translated it for foreign prints, but in the Brazilian theaters, when people read this sentence they all laughed.

In other words the death squad members were not kicked out of the police or punished?

Yes, it's a lie. I had to negotiate the sentence so that they wouldn't ban the film.

Lúcio Flávio like Pixote is a realist film, except for two dream sequences, both of which are violent. After he sniffs glue, Pixote hallucinates walking on the freeway naked at night, but it's very clearly a hallucination brought on by the glue. The dream sequences in Lúcio Flávio are more arbitrary, like the dreams in Buñuel's Los Olvidados.

The dreams in *Lúcio Flávio* take place because sometimes you need all the levels of language to make a film. In *Lúcio Flávio* there is a narrative line like in a newsreel. All the situations are very rational constructions like in a chess game. The camera arrives exactly when something is about to happen. Too many lines crossing. But in the end I know very well what each character represents in this game of chess. I wanted to break that. And I needed to break it with emotions, not with another rational process. So I chose the woman because she was very simple, unsophisticated, like any girl who works in a coffee shop. She's a simple woman in love with this man (Lúcio Flávio). She doesn't know anything about his work. She only loves him because she's happy with him. So I made this nightmare with two ugly characters in the film, two of the police, only to validate her presence in the film, to validate

her relationship with Lúcio Flávio. [In the nightmare the police attack Lúcio Flávio's girlfriend, tear her dress off and murder her. Another dream at the end of the film is very different. Lúcio Flávio is in prison. He dreams that his cellmates stab him to death while he's sleeping. When he awakens from the dream the beginning of the dream starts to repeat itself, but the film ends before he is actually stabbed.—G.C.]

The censors in Brazil could never accept the idea that the film would end by showing a man murdered in prison, especially a man whom the police captured and then publicized widely as their responsibility. In reality two men were put in the cell and paid five dollars to kill him. You know how crazy it is.

And how was I, in 1977 in Brazil during the hardest censorship, going to finish my film? I knew the film would not be released, so I invented the dream because it was a solution people would understand—Lúcio Flávio dreams that people are killing him and the film ends while he is still alive.

One moment before they kill him in reality . . .

Yes, but it's the same shot at the end as during the dream.

It was very powerful even though your reason for doing it may have been to throw off the censors.

It was a bridge to begin thinking of another solution for the censor. Afterwards I liked the solution. But you know, the *real* man who killed Lúcio Flávio was also killed in prison one day before the film opened in Rio de Janeiro.

Did people already know about the film?

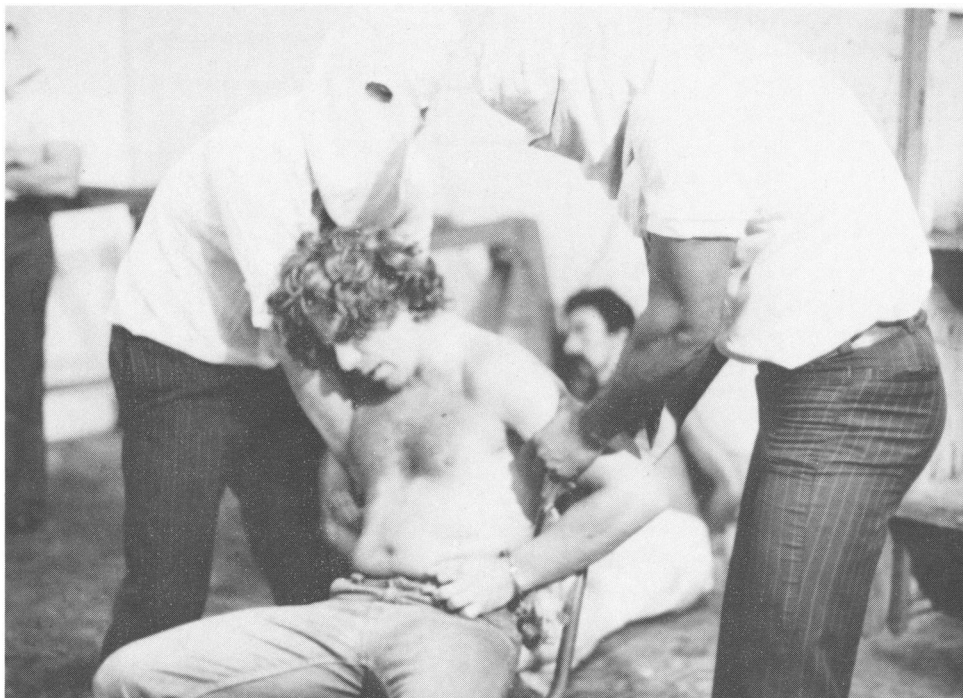
The film opened three weeks earlier in São Paulo. There was incredible publicity. Newspapers, television, everyone was talking about the film. And then the film opened in 65 theaters in Rio de Janeiro. Never had a film opened in so many theaters at the same time in one city. Sixty percent of the theaters in town were running *Lúcio Flávio* for three weeks.

Did this success inspire the wave of Brazilian films about death squads?

Of course, but the other two or three films were bad commercial films—in the worst sense. Not one was a quality film, or true.

Both Lúcio Flávio and Pixote are about hopelessly alienated people—outlaws, abandoned children, transvestites, street prostitutes, etc. How did you develop such a strong

Babenco's
LÚCIO
FLÁVIO



affinity for the dispossessed?

All the outsiders, marginal people, people with nothing, are innocent. If you are in society and you play the game with the real rules of the game then you kill your innocence. Years ago I read a conversation between Krishnamurti and Carl Jung in which they concluded that people must be cured to live in society with the knowledge that society is wrong. I prefer the sick people because they are pure. I'm together with these people. I'm one of the outsiders too. For years I lived in Europe and didn't have money. I was in Italy and Spain trying to find jobs, but never found one. When you don't have money and you're living with a hundred people in one room, it's very difficult. The feeling of innocence that you see in Pixote and the prostitute, and also in my first film *The King of the Night*—is my trademark.

There is some similarity between your notion of the innocence of the outsiders as you call them, and the portrayal of the 15-year-old Indian girl who becomes a traveling prostitute in Amazonas in Jorge Bodánsky's film Iracema. Is this theme gaining importance in Brazilian films?

Jorge Bodánsky and I have the same feelings about Brazilian reality. He was my first friend when I arrived in Brazil during the early seven-

ties. He was working as a documentary cinematographer, and we made a ten-minute documentary about the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo. After that he began *Iracema* in 1974 with German television (ZDF), and I began my first film, *The King of the Night*. We both know how different our work is; he makes all his films in 16mm in *cinéma vérité*, but some day I plan to make a film in partnership with Bodánsky.

What you said about the outsiders and your identification with the poor almost resembles a religious, or mystical approach. Is there anything like that in your background?

I was a very cultured adolescent. I read a lot of books. At the age of 14 I thought like a 25- or 30-year-old man, and when I was 18 I looked like a 40-year-old. I knew everything, but had never lived anything. One day I took a ship from Buenos Aires to Europe with \$17 in my pocket. For seven years I traveled around the world like the hippies. I was very interested in Jack Kerouac, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Céline, Robert Musil, Jean Genêt—all these writers, Henry Miller. I left town to get to know the world, to live, to meet people, to transform my person. It was kind of a divine mission. For years and years there were days that I'm very sure that I was crazy, really crazy.

Then because I had always liked films I began working in Spain and Italy as an extra in spaghetti westerns (many Sergio Corbucci films with Giuliano Gemma and others). One day I decided to find a place to live because I didn't want to live in Europe. I chose Brazil because I had stopped there for four months when I first left Argentina to go to Europe. In my memory Brazil was a fantastic, magic place. A friend helped me make the first payment on a ticket and I began my life again at 26 in Brazil.

At first I worked in many different jobs. I worked as a waiter. For a year I took polaroid pictures in restaurants and nightclubs. I worked another six months selling bibles door to door. For three years I worked different jobs to conquer my freedom so I could make movies. But I always worked in things where I didn't have an employer. I wanted my freedom; it's the most important thing.

How did you get the chance to make your first film?

My first wife helped me, along with many friends.

The King of the Night (1975), which also stars Marília Pera as a prostitute, is virtually unknown in the United States.

It's about a hypocritical man who loved many women. He is born into a good family. At the age of 28 he has a fiancée whom he dutifully visits three times a week. Then he meets a prostitute who falls in love with him and abandons her work to live with him. After a year and a half of living together she has an abortion for him. Then he abandons her because his personality can't stand the idea of living with a woman who was a prostitute.

He returns to his fiancée's sister, because his fiancée has become crazy. She puts on a white dress and walks around in the street—mad. When he returns he gets engaged to the second sister who is very fat, very ugly, but kind and sweet with a good understanding disposition. He marries her.

After nine years of marriage he is unhappy. He works hard in an office, has two children—his life has become ridiculous. He begins an extramarital life with other women—secretaries, operators, switchboard operators. One day he comes home to find his wife trying to commit suicide with a razor. She admits that she is ugly and tells him that she knows he needs

other women, and begs him to kill her because she can't stand to live without him. She then watches as my hero puts poison in big chocolate candies. One day she eats all the chocolates and goes to his job to ask him for a last kiss—with all the chocolate still in her mouth.

At the same time an old woman has taken it upon herself to come and tell him that the prostitute he lived with 20 years earlier is very sick. He goes to the slums and finds this very beautiful woman ruined and ugly. In a melodramatic scene she calls him a coward and expels him from her house. When he arrives home anguish-stricken he finds his wife half dead. He puts the last two candies in her mouth to help her die.

A little black humor after the melodrama.

There are two or three kinds of language in the film. At the funeral which follows his voice drifts over saying, "I think that my destiny with my wife was right for God," and he starts looking at the third sister, who is very religious. He ends up fucking this third sister at his wife's funeral while she's praying to Christ. It looks like a Buñuel film.

Is that the end of the film?

No. Twenty years later he comes out of prison a 70-year-old man with white hair. And with quick cutting we see him working in many different jobs for old people—selling lottery tickets every week, advertising in the streets, etc.—to fantastic music by Astro Piazzola. The ending is a cubist tango, a Stravinsky-like tango. All through the film there is a classical tango leitmotif, but at the end it's destroyed. It becomes unharmonious and rough. At the very end there is a four-minute shot with him drunk in the night alone in the street. That's all.

How did it compare with other Brazilian films made in 1975?

Under the heaviest censorship in Brazil, between 1972 and 1978, people began to make comedies with small erotic scenes, very low-cost films made in 15–20 days. They are very naive films. The plot is usually about a girl from the country who can't find a place to live in the big city. Ninety percent of these films are garbage. But from these films you can understand the needs and values of the people, their conception of eroticism and other things. If you add up several of these unimportant films you can see the face of a culture. They

are made quickly for fast exploitation of the market. But it's better to have a bad Brazilian film than to have a bad French or American film. We are a young country, and I prefer young people to begin by seeing Brazilian films rather than foreign films.

What will your next film be about?

I have two projects. One is *The Emperor of Amazonas*, a book written by Márcio Souza. It's the story of an adventurer during the rubber boom at the beginning of the century in the Amazon. Amazonia was among the richest countries in the world. People didn't have electricity in their houses, but they had their shirts laundered in London. Amazonia is like Alaska. It has its own madness, a kind of delirium. It is common to hear stories about men who go to Amazonia, go crazy and stay there in search of the gold of a lost civilization.

It sounds a little like the idea behind Werner Herzog's new film Fitzcarraldo. Is there any connection?

Nothing, it's so different. I suspect that when Herzog wrote *Fitzcarraldo* he knew about the book *The Emperor of Amazonas*. My adventurer goes to work in 1899 as a mercenary for Brazilian farmers who are at war with Bolivia for ownership of the virgin forest plan-

tations. He wins and gives himself the title of "Emperor." His first order is to have a castle built for himself. The first thing that arrives for construction of the castle is the staircase. He is so anxious to see his castle built that he puts the staircase in the middle of the jungle. Then he puts his desk and his table at the top, and rules from the top of an Italian marble staircase in the middle of the jungle.

A kind of surrealist comedy?

It's a tropical delirium, very different from a comedy. All the things are real, but you don't believe that this kind of reality can exist.

What is your other project?

It's based on a book called *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig, an Argentinian who lives in Rio now. The story is about an old homosexual who lives in Rio de Janeiro, an ex-American sailor who left his ship in 1947 and lives in the port and works in a bar. At a small table he writes letters for prostitutes and other women of the port who want to write their husbands and fiancés and sailors around the world. He writes their letters in English and they pay him. He's a wonderful character with all his fantasies in Hollywood during the fifties.

BRUCE KAWIN

Time and Stasis in *La Jetée*

Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962, released 1964) is identified as a "photo-roman," a photograph-fiction, a term that readily evokes its complex narrative strategies. The visual track consists primarily of still photos connected by straight cuts, fades, and dissolves; the editing rhythms and the variations in camera position are so like those in conventional "moving pictures" that the spectator may feel s/he is watching a movie rather than a comic book, and this impression of flow is reinforced by the sound track of the film, whose music, sound effects, dialogue, and voice-over commentary move along at a normal rate. Though the images seldom move, the film has duration and the impression of proceeding. The commentary—the "roman" element—is con-

tinuous and self-conscious; the nameless hero is "the man of whom one is telling the story." There is more movement than fixity in *La Jetée*, but the overall impression it leaves, the first thing anyone says about it, is that it consists primarily of stills. It is a reasonable assumption that the world of the story—rather than the world of the narration, or discourse—is one in which conventional movement occurs, and that the stills are an aspect of the story-teller's vantage point outside the diegesis. Run to earth, what this implies is that there is an apparent difference between event time and film time that vanishes into a systemic understanding of first, the stasis of the accessible instant, and second, the ways consciousness transforms what it observes and